

The Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857:

A Civilizational Encounter with Lessons for us All

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Abstract

Between September 7 and 11 of 1857 an emigrant wagon train was attacked while traveling through southern Utah toward California. In the end, about 120 were killed, sparing only 17 or perhaps 18 children considered too young to tell the tale. In the annals of war and slaughter this could be considered a tiny event. But for the history of the Great Basin of North America, it was quite exceptional. More white emigrants died on the Mountain Meadows than during any other violent event in the history of the American west. For civilizationalists this is important as a case study of civilizational encounter, because while complex, it has been studied in rare detail. Mormons in the area had arrived just ten years earlier with the expressed purpose of creating a new and morally better civilization than the one they had been violently expelled from. The Indians in the area were coping with a flood of white-skinned immigrants of many kinds who were killing off game and grazing on scarce grasses in a land more desert than not. And the emigrants who died were just passing through, on their way to dreams of riches further west.

This confluence of forces and movements of people from many places combined with specific personalities of leaders and the history of a newly emerging religion with civilizational dreams to create a tragedy even the Greeks could scarcely contemplate. The slaughter was so complete and duplicitous that word of it spread across the continent rapidly. It had dramatic impacts on relations between Mormons and other Americans, some of which echo to this day in states like Arkansas. Therefore this paper will examine mainly those aspects, civilizational encounter and consequences.

Introduction

This case in a nutshell is described in the abstract. Much analysis after the fact has focused on fixing blame for this event, rather than on fixing the problem. From a civilizational perspective, the problem is WHY do groups that claim to be civilized have encounters that lead to killing innocent victims? A derivative is WHAT can be done to reduce the frequency of such lethal encounters? At one level these are abstract questions, but at another level they are intensely practical, because many powerful entities now compete for the resources of our limited earth, and many think they should be rulers of it all. Some are ready for genocide if others resist.

Therefore I will be disinterested in the long debate over to what extent the leader of this new religion in 1857, Brigham Young, was responsible. Rather, I will focus on lessons this episode provides for those who want global civilization to endure.¹

Focus on Lessons for Contemporary Civilizations in Crisis

In previous writing for the ISCSC I concluded that population pressure and militant religion are the two most important causes of a “developing global crisis” (Andregg, 2009). The Mountain Meadows case illustrates these forces quite well, but one must escape the blame paradigm to see that clearly. Human nature seeks to find some human being or institution to blame for tragedies, especially tragedies that involve armed men ambushing and slaughtering women and children. This is natural, but counterproductive in the crisis the current world endures.

At various times various authors have fixed blame for this event on: John D. Lee, the Paiute or Ute Indians, Philip Klingensmith, Brigham Young, on the wagon train victims themselves, on previous conflicts between Mormons and Gentiles² in Missouri and Illinois, on revenge for the murder of apostle Parley Pratt in Arkansas, or the murders of LDS founder Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum at Carthage, Illinois, or on any of many intermediaries (like apostle George A. Smith) between LDS Church headquarters in Salt Lake City and the Cedar City stake where a Mormon militia was undoubtedly mobilized to do the deeds (Backus, Bagley, Brooks, Novak, and Walker, et al). Little of that helps with current dilemmas because of the focus on blame. Most authors attend to the history of the church and its frictions with neighbors from New York to Utah, which establishes essential context. All these items are helpful for a comprehensive understanding of a) what happened, and b) why it happened.

What these lack for me is c) lessons for the future. That is my overriding concern since I want everyone’s children to have a future. That is at risk today due to political conflicts among adults, most of whom feel extremely self-righteous about their wars and lesser conflicts. It would be easy to provide similar examples from Catholic history or the many wars of Islamic countries extending to the Third Millennium phenomenon of non-state terrorism spiced with weapons of mass destruction. What I will do instead is to look for practical answers and how the Mountain Meadows case illuminates those. I don’t care who is to blame; I would much rather save existing children than argue over acts of men long dead.

¹ I will generally refer to this church by its formal name, which resonates with themes of this analysis, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (commonly reduced to LDS Church).

² “Gentiles” is the Mormon term for non-Mormon Christians, and a “stake” is the rough equivalent of a church, but is an administrative unit that may share facilities with other stakes. Mormon temples are distinct, larger than average churches, and have special facilities for temple ordinances and other ceremonies.

Conclusions on the Mountain Meadows Massacre case itself

Juanita Brooks wrote the breakthrough book on this case, first published in 1950, then republished at least four times by the University of Oklahoma Press. She was a devout and extremely brave Mormon historian who concluded that John D. Lee was made a scapegoat for decisions made by many others (he undoubtedly played key roles, was the only man ever convicted for those crimes, and was executed 20 years later). But the whole story is long and complicated which is why I recommend each of these books. Ronald Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard published the current “definitive work” in 2008 through Oxford University Press. They are also sympathetic to the LDS Church (two being official historians of it) but try hard to be objective. So does Will Bagley who wrote his magnum opus in 2002, through Oklahoma University Press, but he is much more critical of Brigham Young, and more revealing about evidence removed than Walker et al are. So as with any academic enterprise, one key to clarity is multiple sources. Anna Jean Backus focused on another individual who was certainly involved, Cedar City LDS Bishop Philip Klingensmith. He was the first participant to provide detailed, recorded and fairly honest testimony about what happened years later, on April 10, 1871 before a Nevada court. Tormented by his conscience, he eventually left the church and died under mysterious circumstances.³ Shannon Novak of Southern Utah University did forensic analysis on bones recovered from the massacre site that proved beyond reasonable doubt that white men with modern weapons did most of the actual killing, a point now not disputed. But for a long time, the main cover story was, ‘It was all Indians.’ After that came other scapegoats like Lee, Klingensmith, and even the victims themselves. Now I will synthesize, using mainly quotes from these sources, each of which did the best they could to get to the bottom of important truths that are difficult to discuss.

Walker, Turley and Leonard (two LDS Church historians, the other independent) begin their great attempt to bring clarity to this tragedy so complicated by generations of obfuscation, rationalization and outright destruction of evidence with these words (pg. ix, Preface):

“On September 11, 1857, Mormon settlers in southern Utah used a false flag of truce to lull a group of California-bound emigrants from their circled wagons and then slaughter them. When the killing was over, more than one hundred butchered bodies lay strewn across a half-mile stretch of an upland meadow. Most of the victims were women and children.

The perpetrators were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, aided by Indians. What did the terrible atrocities say about the killers? What did it say about their church and its leaders?”

³ Full disclosure is due here. I am a great, great, great grandchild of Philip Klingensmith, so I was curious about this massacre due to family lore. That lore is lurid but vague except for the belief he was murdered.

Having studied why men kill for most of my adult life, and why institutions order men to kill, I am less shocked than these devout scholars and applaud them for their honesty. Good American boys slaughtered over 500 innocent Vietnamese at My Lai too, mostly women and children, and others have killed millions more during our wars of the last 50 years, none of which was declared legally according to the U.S. Constitution. So we could call this event quite small. But it is extremely instructive, so again I ask: What do the Mountain Meadows say to children of the Third Millennium who must survive in a world with too many people on too little land, and with weapons of mass destruction all around?

Walker et al go on to note, on page xiv (emphases mine): “The literature suggests other elements are often present when ‘good people’ do terrible things. **Usually there is an atmosphere of authority and obedience**, which allows errant leaders to trump the moral instincts of their followers ... The conditions for mass killing – demonizing, authority, obedience, peer pressure, ambiguity, **fear and deprivation** – all were present in southern Utah in 1857.”

On page 6 and 7 they elaborate on the importance of the “one true church” theme and on Millennialism thus: “The Mormons knew they were ‘peculiar’ people. They had no prepared liturgies, no starched clerical collars, and no purchased pews. They accepted new scripture, including the Book of Mormon, and considered their church **‘the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth’** – the only one with God’s authority.” LDS Church founder, Joseph “Smith also spoke of the **‘last days,’** which eventually became part of the church’s formal name, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” On page 16: “They were believers in the **‘Manifest Destiny’** thinking of their time – that Americans had the self-evident right to the American West.” Such beliefs always lead to conflicts with people already in the area reserved for allegedly chosen peoples. Having seen these themes in many other religious wars, I reached conclusions B and E in the next section.

On page 12, Walker et al relate some of the more frightening moments in a long history of friction between Mormons and others leading up to 1857. “On October 27, 1838, Missouri governor Lilburn W. Boggs ordered that the Mormons be ‘exterminated or driven from the state.’” They recall the murders of church leaders Joseph and Hyrum Smith in Carthage, Illinois, the desperate migration west to find a “New Zion” for refuge, rumors that the U.S. Army was coming to either wipe them out or at least to enforce compliance with Federal laws, and other factors that promoted a siege mentality in Utah.

On page 64 these authors try to place the local Indians in perspective: “The usually passive Paiutes had a rich culture of their own based on agriculture and harmony with the land, which met most of their basic needs until white incursions depleted the game and native plants”. The reason I single this out is that simultaneously, hundreds of Indian tribes in North America were

being deprived of their land and of the fruits thereof by millions of white emigrants seeking fortune in “new territories” full of wealth and a few pesky Indians. This created a culture of frankly reckless killing across a vast frontier. The scale of that destruction utterly dwarfs the Mountain Meadows episode (which is distinct mainly because it was white Christians butchering white Christians rather than darker skinned Indians). So that context also informs the conclusions to follow, especially items A and C.

On page 128: “Civil, religious and military power was dangerously held in the hands of a few.” This succinctly expresses why separation of powers and balancing of powers concepts animated the writers of the U.S. Constitution and its exceptional Bill of Rights. Having also seen this factor in war many times, I recommend practical lessons D and F to come.

So by page 137 they conclude: “By the first week of September (1857), the typical components for group violence existed in Cedar City, including demonization of opponents, a concentration of authority, and a lack of clear orders from headquarters.” Bagley disputes this last conclusion. But since many critical documents have turned up missing (ripped from journals, removed from files, and similar evidence of actual cover-upping) there will not be any final resolution of that topic. Certainly there was communication between headquarters in Salt Lake City and the Cedar City stake which organized the militia that did the killing. But what exactly those communications said are, and likely will remain, ambiguous because they were destroyed.

Regarding the effects on participants of the Massacre, Walker et al conclude on page 209: “None was ever the same again.” Brooks wrote the same in 1950. Later, “The burdens of the massacre would linger far beyond what anyone imagined on the night of September 11, 1857.” (Walker, 209). The effects on the LDS Church would also be profound, which I will get to in the last section. Essentially it was transformed in exactly the opposite direction desired by leaders at that time, but in ways that allowed it to coexist with America lest it be destroyed.

I will quote Anna Jean Backus less because that issue of blame is so unimportant to me, but she presents some other gems worth pondering. On page 109 she notes: “On the last day of the year, December 31, 1857, the horrible news of the massacre finally reached the Ozarks” (in Arkansas where most of the doomed emigrants had come from). This despite the fact that almost everyone from Arkansas died that day, the children spared were mostly under six years old, and the perpetrators were busy destroying evidence or cultivating cover stories. One of the recurring ironies of this type of history is that perpetrators often think their secret will be kept and pledge blood vows among each other to keep them private. But somehow, someone always slips away to tell the tale, and bystanders spread the news through wildfires of private communications. The truth about mass killings has a power that is quite extraordinary. We should learn from events that demand exposure.

On page 123, Backus discusses “blood atonement” another topic the LDS Church prefers to dismiss as a historical artifact of no consequence. Walker et al have only one brief reference to it (pg. 25) as a transient aspect of Mormon reformation at that time. Bagley disagrees with this conclusion, saying blood atonement was central to the absolute obedience expected among Mormon men in the militias of their day, and there are many quotes from the time that indicate many people certainly thought they would be killed if they did not obey. Mrs. Backus writes: “The practice of blood atonement, as the Church knows it today, is a painful memory and isn’t a part of modern day doctrine.” I am sure that is true, but while blood atonement is not a part of modern day LDS Church doctrine, and the Temple Oath of Vengeance was removed on February 15, 1927,* all oaths have consequences. (*source, Mormon Temple Endowment homepage at <http://www.lds-mormon.com/veilworker/oathvenge.shtml>) And practices once established can linger long after they are officially gone, like polygamy which is still practiced in parts of Utah.

On page 124 Backus writes: “They believed, as Latter Day Saints often do today, that they would live to see the last days.” Themes of chosen people facing end times where strict enforcement of conformity is practiced are extremely resistant to change, even when church organizations recognize that such practices lead to very bad consequences.⁴

While still expressing respect for the church of his ancestors, Will Bagley is the most critical of LDS Church doctrines and church statements about evidence and conclusions. He like Juniata Brooks encountered clear evidence of removal of key documents, which usually is done to hide something. Like Walker et al, Bagley begins with “Like all such acts, the murders at Mountain Meadows raise larger questions about the human condition, particularly how decent men can, while acting on their best and firmest beliefs, commit a great evil.” Stanley Milgram had a great deal to say about that in 1974, as do other students of this problem writ large. World War II stimulated much relevant scholarship on why “good people” can commit such horrible deeds as genocide. Let me simplify – almost anyone can do it under the right circumstances. The main requirement is an aggressive authority proclaiming that this as the moral thing to do for God and country. But many people have a very difficult time facing this disturbing truth.

In Bagley’s preface, page xvii: “In their desire to exonerate Brigham Young of any guilt, official Mormon accounts of the crime laid the blame on victims and Indians, a tradition that is alive and well today.” Then on page xviii: “Like many new faiths, 19th century Mormonism had a dark side of violence and fanaticism. The devotion of early Latter-day Saints and their mix of politics and religion repeatedly provoked conflict with their neighbors. The Saints regarded such opposition as persecution of their righteousness.” This phenomenon of pressing against neighbors (exacerbated by population pressure and pronatalistic policies) and then blaming neighbors who push back of persecuting the faithful is a highly recurrent aspect of the wars of

⁴ A contemporary example is the settler movement in modern Israel that adamantly opposes any attempt at peace with Palestinians because they believe that “God” gave their ancestors all land between the Nile and Euphrates rivers, an area which they call “Eretz Israel.” <http://www.eretzisraelforever.net/home.asp>

militant religions. For more on that see “Authoritarian Law and Militant Religion” in Andregg, 1999. Finally, Bagley notes that: “Today the (LDS) religion has abandoned its support of ‘holy murder’ and virtually every practice – polygamy, theocracy, blood atonement, consecration, communalism, millennialism – that made it so provocative in the 19th century.”

Not all things change. On page 12 Bagley writes: “Obedience in Mormon culture remains ‘the first law of heaven, the cornerstone on which all righteousness and progression rest: demanding complete subjection to God and his commands.” Very serious parallels can be made here to beliefs among the stricter Islamists who also feel they have the best religion and that a God named Allah expects them to convert everyone else on earth in due time. They too are not the only devout Muslims on this earth. But this idea of strict obedience to some “God’s” will (ever interpreted by some preacher, rabbi or imam) is very important to the probability of violence. On page 15: “The council (of 50) and its operations were cloaked in secrecy, and to this day the LDS Church refuses to make its minutes public.” So do the U.S. President and his advisors. Secrecy in governance is too large a topic for this essay, because secrecy serves some essential functions while also enabling terrible crimes. See prescription F in particular.

On page 17: “For the Saints, the war at the end of time had already begun” (in early 1857). Game theory, which has much to say about conflict and cooperation among humans and groups of humans, provides special warnings about the “last move” of various scenarios, especially in the category called “Prisoner’s Dilemmas.” Anytime a person or peoples thinks that the earth actually faces an ‘end of times’ (or last move) some who were previously deterred from bad behavior tend to run amok.

On page 141 Bagley provides some testimony of another participant in the massacre, Nephi Johnson, who said: “They (John D. Lee in particular) believed all the Gentiles were to be killed as a war measure, and that the Mormons, as God’s chosen people, were to hold and inhabit the earth and rule and govern the globe.” This quote is also cited in Brooks, pg. 224.

Page 275: Philip Klingensmith testifies before the clerk of the Seventh Judicial District Court of the State of Nevada on April 10, 1871, and blows a lid off of many cover-ups. On page 276 of Bagley: “... the former bishop presented the massacre as simply a militia operation and omitted any mention of Indians. Yet his statement was the most honest and comprehensive account of the murders ever made by a participant.” What matters here is not Klingensmith’s reputation but lessons for the future. His testimony made clear that he expected to be murdered for telling the truth about the Mountain Meadows, so he testified in Nevada to buy time. The mysterious circumstances by which he died are too complicated for this essay, but many family members think he was murdered by assassins enforcing the blood oath of silence. Like assassins in other historic circumstances, this did not reduce propagation of the truth in the long run. In fact it may have accelerated propagation of the truth. One other perpetrator provided detailed, recorded testimony, John D. Lee, at his two trials. At the first trial he was acquitted, at the last convicted, both by entirely Mormon juries who were very responsive to the mood of headquarters.

Bagley quotes John D. Lee on page 311: “If I have sinned and violated the laws of my country, I have done so because I have blindly followed and obeyed the orders of the Church leaders. ... I was guided in all that I did which is called criminal, by the orders of the leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” Walker et al note in detail, however, that Lee was offered lenience several times if he would implicate Brigham Young in particular, but Lee always refused to do so right up to his execution on the very meadows where the massacre took place.

Practical Answers and Special Difficulties

There are exceptional difficulties dealing with both population pressure and militant religion. First, Darwinian evolution predicts that people will defend their rights to unrestrained reproduction almost as fiercely as they defend life itself, because no genes get selected unless parents both survive and reproduce. Second, organizations also live in a Darwinian universe of limited resources, so they compete with others for their life force also, which is people willing to give money or time to those institutions. For some groups this generates strong pro-natalistic policies and strict taboos against criticism. The Catholic Church is a classic example, punishing budding scientists like Galileo for daring to speak forbidden truths, and the early LDS Church expressed both by doctrines of polygamy and obedience “even when authority is wrong.”⁵

When many organizations occupy a finite space, some encounter significant conflicts with each other, and in the history of our earth thousands have been completely wiped out. So a natural Darwinian tendency to rationalize unrestrained reproduction interacts synergistically with similar tendencies among organizations with long time horizons who want to outbreed each other, or at least to survive.

Therefore taboos about discussing population pressure are one big problem. Fear of militant religions or militant religiosity is another, and many critics of that phenomenon have been silenced around the world for centuries. Some by mere fear, others by being murdered by their neighbors if they say the wrong words. The latter is especially common in some modern Islamic Republics like Iran. Militant religions can be extremely militant toward internal critics and outsiders even when they are as dominant and as safe as anyone gets on our fragile earth. When militant religions are frightened by real enemies, they can be downright cruel as they enforce brisk obedience to the dominant authority of the threatened tribe, clan, church or civilization. There are very good reasons why many people fear theocracies.

⁵ My source for this phrase is conversation with a professor emeritus of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University, Donald Q. Cannon, but other phrasings can be found in many other places like the previously cited Walker et al., pgs. 6-7, and Bagley, page 12. Subsequent dialogue with Dr. Cannon yielded: “LDS Church members are taught that obedience is the first law of heaven. They are also taught to be obedient to God, God’s laws and to God’s representatives, i.e. Church leaders.”

These great difficulties discussing population pressure and militant religions noted, here are six practical answers to the recurring problem of civilizational encounters on our earth.

- A. Taboos on birth control and pro-natalistic policies should be reexamined and population policies should be articulated in many countries beyond China. The emigrant wagon train slaughtered at Mountain Meadows had conflicts with the Mormons over scarce grazing grounds at population densities one-hundredth those we see today. Mormons and Gentiles both drove the Paiutes to economic desperation. The concept of “Tragedy of the Commons”⁶ should be known by children everywhere since it is their commons that is being destroyed by adults of today. This runs contrary to current and past LDS Church doctrines discussed in the last section, among a number of other powerful churches. So this hard truth should be made known even though it will certainly be resisted.
- B. Claims of unquestionable, divine truth should be challenged, even when they are dogmas of churches that do many good works on this earth. Here I will note a Catholic example. Few churches do so much for the poor in so many locations of our earth as the Catholic Church. Yet that church’s ban on birth control also promotes endless starvation and war. This paradox is due to misunderstandings between high principal and actual practice (and consequences) that could be mitigated, if open conversation about them were allowed. But open conversation is not allowed among “the faithful” so millions suffer and many die young. This is especially tragic since all involved mean well, and truly care about life and the welfare of children. Exclusive, divine truths mediated by the President of the LDS Church and his apostles are at least as important to Mormons as Popes and cardinals are to Catholics. But those whose judgment cannot be questioned inevitably make errors, some of which can echo for centuries and harm innocents far away in space and time.
- C. Claims of divine mission to out-populate other groups should be revealed as the simple Darwinian competitions they are, expressed in fancy words. Such claims should be put in the “Tragedy of the Commons” context, and official clergy who are adamant about their “divine missions” should be asked how they will preserve the earth for children if they destroy it by an arms race of bodies that need to be fed.
- D. Promote pluralism and secular states. Children around the world should be taught that they must share this planet with each other no matter what their color or creed. That is pluralism. Otherwise their common home will be destroyed by wars with weapons of mass destruction, or nibbled to death by too many billions of human mouths on too little

⁶ Coined in a 1968 essay by Garrett Hardin, this phrase is almost universally recognized among biologists because there are so many cases where common resources get degraded by individuals or by competing groups each taking what they need without anyone looking after preservation for the long term. Classic examples are global fisheries, river watersheds and tribal or collective grazing lands, but there are many others. Our entire earth is experiencing **tragedy of commons** issues today, most notably depletion of biodiversity and issues like climate change.

land. So far secular governments have proven to be the best at reducing wars among religious factions, and the pluralism they necessarily teach reduces many smaller conflicts. Turkey may be the best case from the Islamic world today, and the story of Ataturk's transformation of Turkey after the fall of the Ottoman Empire is instructive. America's manifold struggles with civil rights are another, from the Revolution to the Civil War, through emancipation of women and creation of the concepts of civil and human rights. Each was opposed by some churches and supported by other churches at the same time. The changes that occurred in Utah after the Mountain Meadows Massacre are instructive here too.

- E. Millennialism, Armageddonism, Apocalypticism, or other "end time" thinking should be discouraged. The Mountain Meadows Mormons certainly believed that they were living in an end times where they were supposed to overthrow their enemies with divine help. Those beliefs contributed directly to their frictions with "Gentiles." A modern example is some Christian Zionists who truly believe the creation of Israel presages an Armageddon within one generation, and so exert themselves to promote a genocidal Third World War.
- F. Secrecy in government is generally bad. Of course there are exceptions to that general rule. But all the world's genocides, massacres and lesser slaughters were enabled by secrecy at the top and cultivation of some sense of blind obedience to duty below. Leaders in such systems develop impunity from legal constraints. And people blinded by such leaders cannot tell the innocent from the guilty, or wise policy from corrupt or evil policies, so secrecy in government is generally a bad practice.

Changes in the LDS Church after the Mountain Meadows Affair

Whatever was intended by whoever ordered Mountain Meadows, this massacre became the biggest public relations disaster ever for the LDS Church as news of it spread across America. Not just among non-Mormons, but among the faithful who knew enough about their church's practices to reach their own conclusions about authority and responsibility. Infallibility among church leaders was no longer tenable.

The U.S. President of that time, James Buchanan, had his hands full trying to keep 11 Southern States from seceding from the Union. Mormons were a much smaller problem, but convenient. So he campaigned against "the twin evils of barbarism," slavery and polygamy. The latter was common only among Mormons, who proclaimed it a civil duty of responsible (and mainly prominent) men.

Buchanan had dispatched about 2500 troops to Utah in mid-1857 to find out why so many Federal officials had fled the territory in fear for their lives, bringing stories about a theocracy

that intended to replace the U.S. government on their way to ruling the world. But when news of the massacre arrived later that year, the urgency of that task escalated. And the brutality of the Mountain Meadows massacre raised questions about how “Christian” the Mormons really were.

This had bigger consequences than may appear on first review. Remember that Indians were being displaced wholesale across a vast frontier with very few objections from the Christian faithful. Individual Indians were being shot every day like coyote in the American west. And millions of immigrants from Europe were arriving every year, most of whom were urged to “go west” where adventure and fortunes beacons for those with the courage to face the rigors of frontier life.

One stream in that torrent of immigration were recent converts to the LDS Church, especially from Britain but from dozens of other countries as well due to the practice of sending young Mormon men on evangelical missions worldwide. This resulted in a growth rate far greater than any natural reproduction could sustain. That growth was compounded by polygamy and the general church instruction to good Mormon women to produce as many babies as possible. The nominal reasons were always good ones, but they also produced phenomenal population pressure. When the faithful were called to Utah to prepare for war with America as prelude to conquering the world, the stage was set for a really serious conflict.

Mountain Meadows set a match to that, but the new Kingdom was barely ten years old. Fleeing Nauvoo Illinois, Brigham Young’s advance party arrived at the valley in the summer of 1847, and they were in no practical position to actually conquer the rest of America. Rather, the massacre made the mission of Buchanan’s troops more urgent and focused. On the way to Utah they had laid over winter in Fort Bridger far to the east of Salt Lake City. By April of 1849 their mission included finding the surviving 17 children and returning them to Arkansas. On the Mormon side, pretending that the LDS Church had nothing to do with the children’s orphan status replaced preparing for war with the U.S. Army.

Other vast forces were at work. The pending Civil War dominated national politics. And when the rail link from east to west coasts was completed on May 10, 1869 at Promontory Summit, Utah, the torrent of pioneers heading west at such great sacrifice became a flood which no group could oppose no matter how cohesive, militant or special.

Desiring normal statehood status now rather than pariah status, and recognizing their inability to conquer America much less to establish rule over the entire earth quickly, Brigham Young and his successor John Taylor compromised on various issues. And the next LDS President Wilford Woodruff made the biggest compromise with the U.S. President of his day, renouncing polygamy as a church doctrine on September 24, 1890 and accepting Federal supremacy of law.

Brigham Young had managed to avoid personal responsibility and official church responsibility for the Mountain Meadows Massacre by focusing blame on one of his most loyal adopted sons,

John D. Lee. Acquitted at his first trial by an all Mormon jury, Lee was convicted at his second by another all Mormon jury. Lee was executed by Federal agents on the meadows itself on March 28, 1877. From that point on most involved wanted to focus on the future rather than the past – on a future where Mormons would be just another church in the vast array of religions that shared an America animated by the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution rather than by any particular scripture.

The problems discussed here are by no means unique to the LDS Church. It has learned a great deal about how to interact with other religions without bloodshed, one byproduct of negotiations so that LDS missionaries can travel the world doing their good works without undue risk.

Amos Guiora was an Israeli Army Colonel and U.S. law professor (from Salt Lake City) who had deep reasons of his own to look at religious violence because, among other duties, he had been the attorney in charge of authorizing targeted killings in Gaza for three years. He looks at cases from five countries, but the most revealing for this paper is his study of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995. The Prime Minister was murdered by a Jewish man much encouraged (and maybe helped) by weeks of vitriolic condemnation by extremist rabbis due to Rabin's work on peace in the area. They thought that treason, and actually issued a religious death threat similar to the better known "fatwa's" of Islamic countries.

There are many other cases in history and in the contemporary world of civilizational or ethnic conflict where religion may be posited as an ultimate cause. In such cases ethnicity is often so commingled with the religious difference that assigning cause to one or the other can be quite arbitrary. For example, 4 days of riots starting July 5, 2009 in the Uighur city Urumqi in Xinjian province in far western China killed between 184 mostly Han Chinese according to Chinese officials, to over a thousand mostly Uighur according to expatriate Uighur scholars and activists. What is certain is that tension between the mostly Muslim Uighurs and the relentlessly secular Chinese authorities had been building for decades as Beijing pursued policies promoting immigration of ethnic Han into many remote provinces formerly dominated by minorities. The Hanization of Tibet after 1950 was considerably more graphic and killed many thousands more, but I doubt this would best be explained as a religious conflict. Rather it was simply that with thousands of Han starving after Mao's revolution, giving desperate peasants a remote place to go became a big priority to the central government. And pacifying dissident minorities still is considered best done by encouraging large numbers of Han to migrate into those territories.

Another possible case involved the gradual infiltration of then Serbian Kosovo by ever greater numbers of Muslim Albanians in the late 20th century in a self-proclaimed effort to create a "Greater Albania" with boundaries more similar to the old Ottoman Empire. Serbs tend to be Russian Orthodox Christians and their culture reveres an historical moment where Serbs and Ottoman Turks fought on Kosovo Field in 1389. Religion was also highlighted by politicians during the wars they started that broke the former Yugoslavia into 7 new countries by 2008.

These could also be mere echoes of the ancient ethnic conflicts of that region over wealth and political power, more than fundamentally religious conflicts. Again that is pretty subjective, because ethnicity, religion and economic opportunity have been commingled there for centuries.

The problem of “religious murder” occurs in every place and most faiths. Thus it becomes the business of any church or religion that takes its claims to moral leadership seriously. In a world filled with weapons of mass destruction and more people every day, beliefs and behaviors of churches matter, whether large or small. The Mountain Meadows case is one where the murderers thought they were doing the right thing, sanctioned by the moral leaders of their place and time. So we should ponder how such devotion can lead to the slaughter of innocents, because it has not happened just there, and it will happen again until we solve this problem.

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